

A good return and a growing legacy

This Cork farmer says there are short and longer-term benefits from prudent planting.

John Casey
Teagasc Forestry
Development Officer



I always aim to do the right thing, even if not at exactly the right time,” jokes James O’Sullivan, Clara, Millstreet, Co Cork, as he describes his experience managing his farm forestry and building his forestry knowledge and confidence over the last 30 odd years.

In 1989, James’ late father, Matthew was rearing cattle part-time on 34ha just outside the town. James encouraged his father to plant trees on 10.5ha of marginal agricultural land away from the main farm. At the time, his father was unsure about this decision, due to the permanency of the land use change.

However, he also felt on balance that that the land was “of no real farming use” since the cost of reclaiming and maintaining the wet, marshy ground couldn’t be justified.

James freely admits that they were looking no further than the grant aid when they planted the mainly Sitka spruce crop.

A further 1.5ha of Sitka spruce and ash were planted in 1994 by SWS Forestry. “The subsequent performance of the trees certainly convinced us of the strong credentials of farm forestry,” he says.

The majority of the 1989 crop was ready for first thinning in 2010. Conventional harvest management of a Sitka spruce plantation may result in just 20-25% of the initial tree stocking being left at the clearfell stage, following a number of regular thinning operations.

The remaining trees are left with more light and room to grow to their full sawlog potential.

The thinned trees can be sold to make a variety of products such as

stakes, pallet, paper, or medium density fibreboard (MDF).

The thinnings from James’ spruce crop were sold ‘standing’ to Grainger Sawmills of Enniskeane, Co Cork, (known as GP Wood since 2013). There was good road access to the forest site, with a gated barrier in place.

To monitor how much timber was leaving the site, James requested that the haulage contractor ring him 30 minutes in advance to open the barrier for each of the 14 loads. Approximately 350t were harvested and James received €11/t directly – nearly €3,900 in total.

Planting

The successful and profitable thinning of his first crop prompted James to consider further planting. I walked his farm in 2010 and we went through the various planting options.

The proposed new planting area was nearer the farmyard and James felt that he would prefer broadleaves closer to the house to provide landscape and biodiversity enhancements. The higher premium for broadleaf species was also an incentive.

According to James: “Planting broadleaves was better for the environment and future generations in the long run and better for my pocket in the short-term.”

In the end, James planted 5.6ha and 4.5ha of mainly oak, with some ash and birch, in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Collectively, the afforested land earns James €6,000 per year in premium.

“A wonderful start to any new year,” says James. “My only regret is that I did not plant more 20 years ago.”

In May 2011, James hosted a joint Teagasc/Forest Service early management walk, which shared valuable insights on early broadleaf management, vegetation control, shaping and stocking with new forest owners.



James reckoned that he also gained “huge information” from the questions posed by the attendees.

By 2017, the Sitka spruce plantation was 28 years old and was ready to be thinned for the second time. After shopping around for the best



James O'Sullivan in his 2011 oak plantation.

prices, James again sold the timber – standing – to GP Wood. His relative proximity to their sawmill benefitted both parties.

James stresses the benefits from his good relationships with, and between, his buyer and a competent haulage

contractor. James earned €7,900 from the second thinning.

Knowledge Transfer Group

In 2019, James signed up to participate in a DAFM-funded forestry Knowledge Transfer Group (KTG),

organised by Forestry Services Ltd. KTGs are a well-established method of sharing knowledge and best practices.

These forestry KTGs support private forest owners seeking additional knowledge on issues such as when, and how, to carry out forest management activities in a safe and environmentally responsible manner.

The KTGs also provide a maximum of 20 participants with the essential tools to help maximise the returns from their valuable timber resource. Knowledge of that value plays an integral part in decision making on whether to retain or sell mature and semi-mature woodland.

Forestry KTGs are peer-to-peer discussion groups led by a professional forester and incorporate both classroom style knowledge exchange as well as practical learning elements.

In James' case, the KTG sessions consisted of five indoor and two outdoor meetings and he received €70 per meeting attended.

"I was very interested to tour GP Wood's mill in Enniskeane and see for myself where the thinnings were processed," says James.

James hosted a field trip to his own forest, as it was perfect to demonstrate a range of forest stages, from early management to second thinning, with both conifers and broadleaves on view in abundance.

Future plans

In the spring of 2020, James and I walked the forestry on his farm, assessing both the harvest prospects of the maturing 32 year old conifer plantation and the progress of the younger 10 year old broadleaf forest. The more immediate priority for James is the second shaping of the 10 year old oak forest.

Shaping is the process of removing forks and large competing side branches in order to improve the quality of broadleaf trees, resulting in long, straight lengths of timber for future sale to higher value markets.

Armed with a paint marker and Teagasc's *Silvicultural Guidelines for the Tending and Thinning of Broadleaves*, James is now ready to start marking what he considers to be his 'Potential Crops Trees' (PCTs) – approximately 300 per hectare of the strongest and best quality trees. The overall shape/form of these trees will then be improved by shaping next winter.

"The oak plantation provides me with a great sense of calmness in these turbulent times," concludes James. "And it's nice to feel you are making a good return, but leaving a bit of a legacy too."